

Giant U.S. 'Plows' Raze Jungle on Enemy Route

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DUCHUE, South Vietnam, May 6—The flat, fertile landscape of this former rice-paddy district is undergoing one final disfigurement of war. After having been dug up by the enemy for bunkers and tunnels, and, after the bombing, defoliation and napalm, the Rome Plows—giant United States Army bulldozers—are now cutting through the remaining scrub and abandoned farms to leave the soil bare, gray and lifeless.

The 32-ton heavily armored bulldozers—their name comes from their manufacturer—are operating 20 abreast through this enemy-infiltration route from Cambodia to the Saigon areas.

The men who peer through the rolling dust, and through the heavy steel latticework that protects them from the frequent mine explosions, are from the 60th Land Clearing Company, and they call themselves "The Jungle Eaters."

In the last seven days, the bulldozers have cleared 1,400 acres of any trace of man's presence—the low, now disused dikes that once separated one peasant's ricefield from his neighbor's are obliterated, and the more recent enemy bunkers are all buried.

Some Graves Untouched

"We leave the old graves, because they're sacred for the people who used to live here," said Sgt. Leslie Hornsby, a Rome Plow platoon leader. "But we dig up the new graves, because usually they're just enemy caches."

"How do I decide about houses?" he continued. "Well, if it don't have anybody in it we knock them down."

There are still a handful of families living in poor, widely separated houses in this district. They have abandoned farming and live by collecting wood. From the air, the women, in clean white smocks, can be seen as they walk beside ox-carts laden with the dry poles they sell to the charcoal kilns nearer Saigon.

Often the dirt road that the oxen follow almost blindly from long habit has dis-

appeared under the sharp, sloping blade of the bulldozers, and the women have trouble driving their animals over the scarred earth.

United States Army officials explain that "landclearing," as the operation is called, is necessary to deny the enemy even the slightest bit of concealment. They argue that the Vietcong and North Vietnamese long ago drove the people off the land and that whatever is done to it now will not matter.

Before the war, the flat countryside was dotted with hardwood timber, but only a few of the tall bare trunks now remain after the years of defoliation along the Cambodian border.

The countryside is also pockmarked with 30-foot-wide water-filled bomb craters, which the Rome Plow operators carefully steer around.

Plows Under Attack

The American armored cavalry officers maintain that the landclearing hurts the enemy, noting that the plows have come under repeated attack.

In late April, the North Vietnamese attacked a clearing operation just north of here, killing four Americans, including the company commander, and wounding 17.

Since then, the plows have worked under the guns of Sheridan tanks and armored personnel carriers, which follow them in their wide slashing circles through the diminishing groves of thickets and shrubs. The pattern they use for "the cut" resembles the circular pattern followed by a suburban homeowner cutting his lawn.